

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Steny H. Hoyer (MD-5) delivered the keynote address this morning at the International Association of Fire Fighters Convention. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

“I’m honored to be here today, and I want you to know how much I admire the work you do and the risks you take to protect our communities and our families. No matter how advanced your equipment is, the role you play in our communities is a timeless one. As long as we’ve lived together in communities, we’ve relied on the bravery of a few individuals who step up to protect their neighbors and their families. You step up and choose that responsibility. And you couldn’t do it without loving the communities you protect.

“You do it knowing the risks—knowing that about 100 firefighters are killed in the line of duty each year. This year, already, 23 firefighters have sacrificed their lives protecting us. And right now, firefighters are standing guard, willing to do the same. They’re waiting on duty to protect us if the worst happens. And when we go to sleep tonight, some of them will still be waiting up: we get to sleep soundly, because they don’t. I know it’s easy to take that protection for granted, because it’s so reliable. But Congress cannot take it for granted.

“So last month, when some in Congress tried to cut the funds that pay for up-to-date equipment, for the latest training, and for firehouses that are fully staffed, I was proud to be among those who stood up and said ‘no.’ I was proud to support the FIRE and SAFER programs because we know that they work: in an independent study, the U.S. Fire Administration found that grants like these are making fire departments across the country more prepared for emergencies, and better equipped to do their job. But I was also proud to support those programs because we owe firefighters our support: it’s the least we can do in return for your sacrifices, your dedication, and all your sleepless nights.

“I know that these are difficult fiscal times for our country. I know that our debt is a burden on our children, and it’s our responsibility to reduce it. I think that cutting spending, in a smart, targeted way, is part of the answer. But I do not believe that scapegoating public servants like you is part of the answer at all. When we pin the blame on our public servants we’re only proving that we don’t take our fiscal problems seriously and would rather score cheap political

points than offer real solutions.

“I believe that public safety officers like you deserve the right to collective bargaining. I stand with President Eisenhower, a Republican, who said: ‘Workers have a right to organize into unions and to bargain collectively with their employers. And a strong, free labor movement is an invigorating and necessary part of our industrial society.’

“I stand with our firefighters because of all they do to keep our communities safe. I want you to know that you have my respect, and Congress’s respect, for your sacrifices. But I imagine that the respect that matters the most doesn’t come from Washington, D.C. It comes from your neighbors, your friends, your children and loved ones, whenever they reflect on the work you do and the vital responsibility you take up.”